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ABSTRACT

In 1984, the Commissions on Composition, Curriculum, Language, Literature, Media, and Reading of the National Council of Teachers of English presented reports on important educational trends and issues. The Commission on Language suggested that the move toward curriculum reform stemming from national reports on quality in education could have negative results. The Commission on Curriculum stressed the need for language arts curricula combining the best of current practice and theory, a stronger humanities background in elementary teacher education, a more balanced language arts curriculum at all levels, and careful monitoring of technology's impact on the curriculum. While identifying the inclusion of minorities in classroom materials and the emphasis on storytelling as literature as positive trends, the Commission on Literature noted a general decline in students' exposure to literature. The Commission on Reading discussed information dissemination, the current sociopolitical climate, the reading curriculum, and emerging theoretical issues, while the Commission on Composition focused on teacher preparation and teaching strategies in writing. Finally, the Commission on Media reported a modest renaissance of interest in media use in English but expressed concern over a number of problems, including the failure to integrate the media into the curriculum and the lack of media-related competencies in teacher certification. (MM)

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1984 REPORT ON TRENDS AND ISSUES IN ENGLISH

A Summary of Reports from the NCTE Commissions

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What do the members of the Council's most prestigious deliberative groups--the Commissions on Composition, Curriculum, Language, Literature, Media, and Reading--see as the most important trends and issues in their fields? Late in 1983 the NCTE Executive Committee asked these groups to discuss that question and to report on trends and issues on an annual basis. The commissions responded with the interesting and incisive comments summarized below.

The full texts of the commissions' reports (along with individual sheets filled out by many commission members) cannot be presented because of their length and differences in format. Some commission directors presented a consensus paper, while others summarized discussions that embraced disparate views, or submitted the individual sheets without commentary. Because of these variations, the brief summary below does not rank-order or correlate the trends noted by the various commissions; nor are the names of individual commission members attached to particular ideas. Key words and phrases from the commissions' reports are italicized.

Language

The Commission on Language (Peter H. Fries, Director) saw some negative results arising from the various national reports on quality in education. Some of the reports call for a common curriculum; this does not augur well for research-based instruction in language. A uniform curriculum cannot adequately deal with language variation and cultural differences. The

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reports are prompting policy-making bodies to insist on "inefficient and inaccurate standardized instruments in competency testing." The renewed emphasis on measurable skills militates against broader views of instruction in oral and written language. One commission member added that computers will "further the trend toward quantification of triviality." But another cited the positive potential for the computer in language instruction, especially in word processing and in teaching students to create computer programs in ways that make systematic use of language skills.

In the area of scholarly research, one member noted the healthy trend towards collaborative research involving teachers and research specialists but declared the lack of dissemination of knowledge gained through such research. Another called for fact sheets on language-related issues "to get more urgently needed information to the public.

Some negative trends in research were cited, though. One commission member urged caution in the use of meta-analysis, because it normally uses "only studies that were originally quantitative" and "encourages substituting technique for close observation of the phenomenon of interest." Conclusions drawn from meta-analysis, she noted, "come from a skewed sample of studies--quantitative research that may not be the most illuminating in relation to language. She cited both positive and negative aspects of a research trend towards "defining literacy as a purely social and historical phonomenon." While the emerging anthropological/historical viewpoint "rights the imbalance of looking at literacy only as a psychological phenomenon," it will diminish the study of "the linguistic, psychological, and social processes . . . involved in reading and writing," and might blur important pedagogical refinements based on psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic research.

Curriculum

The Commission on Curriculum (Eileen Lundy, Director) focused on five issues, some of them related to concerns of other commissions. For example, the urgency of communicating "a cohesive idea of research and development in writing instruction to. . . educational administrators at all levels" was cited. As further support for writing instruction, the commission recommended university-school cooperation in developing district-wide curricula in writing and in writing across the curriculum. They supported a "reduction of general courses in education for prospective teachers to provide time . . . in their degree programs for courses in rhetoric and composition, literature, and... the humanities."

The Commission made special mention of publicizing and supporting schools that effectively implement English language arts curricula based on the "best of current theory and practice." The processes used by those schools in formulating and implementing curricula should also be described for the benefit of the profession.

On the issue of the place of humanities in a technological society, the commission urged reinstatement of humanities courses in the preparation of elementary school teachers, and called for more balanced English language arts curricula at all levels (e.g., correcting a widespread overemphasis on narrowly conceived reading skills instruction). In a healthy technological society, commission members said, the impact of technology on curriculum is closely monitored, and computer software and other technological innovations are carefully evaluated.

Literature

The Commission on Literature (Darwin Turner, Director) identified eight trends and issues. Two positive points were the inclusion of minorities in classroom materials (tempered by the fact that teachers and editors tend to stress the sociological rather than aesthetic value of minority literature); and the emerging trend, in schools and communities, to emphasize storytelling as literature.

But the commission noted a general decline in exposure of students to literature at all levels--a curriculum trend aggravated by the fact that "literature specialists are either giving up or are losing control of the library acquisitions." Publishing houses, moreover, are issuing fewer literary works in comparison to nonfiction. Although some publishers continue to produce the same total number of books, the proportion of fictional works is declining and the quality of the fictional works published is poorer.

In the schools, two negative trends were cited. The tendency for school boards to insist on single anthologies in English classes has resulted in less diversity and variety in the classroom. Moreover, censorship is increasing rather than diminishing. In teacher education, the current emphasis on reading and writing skills has undermined the training of students to teach literature (except perhaps the teaching of literature for adolescents). Finally, members of the commission sensed a decline in the teaching of world literature--an especially unfortunate trend at a time when "there is a need for greater global concern."

Reading

The Commission on Reading (Jerome C. Harste, Director) noted numerous trends and issues, summarized by the director under the headings "The Politics of Literacy" and "Curriculum Plus." The former dealt with the dissemination of information and the current unfavorable sociopolitical climate; the latter, with emerging theoretical issues and the reading curriculum.

Concern was expressed for dissemination of information about the implications of reading research to three kinds of audiences--to the general public, who might be reached through articles in popular magazines and through information sheets placed in strategic sites (e.g., physicians' offices); to administrators and teachers of other subject areas, reached through articles in their journals and cosponsored sessions at their conventions; and fellow teachers of English language arts, many of whom meet in "support groups" during professional meetings and in less formal settings to share ideas about research-based instruction.

The "Curriculum Plus" issues ranged from the abstract to the practical. One commission member noted new insights emerging in narratology, a field in which important links are being discovered between narration and exposition. He recommended further study so reading specialists can begin to connect narrative to exposition and "demonstrate that the reading and writing skills needed for both are more similar than different." Another member suggested that the expansive new paradigms from the sciences be linked with psycholinguistic/schema-theoretic paradigm in reading and the transactional paradigm in literary theory. For example, strong relationships can be established between tenets of the new physics and those of educational theory.

Still another perspective was suggested by a member who stressed "reading across symbol systems"--a semiotic viewpoint in which various aspects of "print reading" (including foreign languages, various content areas, and computer-generated display systems) and "nonprint reading" (such as the graphic arts, film, and television) are explored. The goal, she said, is to understand the "reading implications" of our use of these media and the possible transfer of skills from one medium of communication to another.

The semiotic perspective seemed too broad for a member who favored "a language and language learning focus" for the reading curriculum. Issues in reading instruction, currently addressed in narrow terms of skills and activities, should be cast in terms of "the mental trip we associate with successful language use and learning." A limiting factor in establishing research-based reading curriculum, another member pointed out, is the ubiquity of testing systems, which are extending downward to the elementary school. Pressure for high test scores from Boards of Education and the community results in teaching to the test; consequently, "concern for the nature of the reading and/or writing process is lost." Matters of politics and curriculum merge in discussion of testing.

Composition

The Commission on Composition (Paul Bryant, Director) saw teacher preparation as a major issue. Prospective teachers must be well grounded in, among other things, techniques of writing and knowledge of how students learn.

The commission dealt with the complex issue of teaching academic discourse to all students in high school. On one hand, teaching such discourse (defined as "the set of conventions that

characterize college writing") can be seen as "part of the effort to afford universal access to higher education." But that viewpoint might not account for other aspects of writing instruction, including developmental writing, basic writing, and "the long continuing controversy over the students' right to their own language." The movement of subject matter downward from college to high school to elementary grades in areas like argumentation, formal logic, and the research paper was seen by the commission as "an unfortunate development in most cases." To sort out these problems, the commission noted, better articulation, kindergarten through university, is needed.

Writing centers and peer tutoring were cited as growing trends at college and secondary levels. Commission members said that not enough is known about the resources provided for writing centers ("Are they sometimes used as a cheap way to solve problems?"); about the actual and desirable qualifications of the staff; and about the relationships of the centers to the regular composition program. Again, they saw articulation and integration as a key to effective use of teachers, materials, and programs.

The commission also saw testing as an important issue because of the widespread growth of competency testing in writing and the recent acquisition of the National Assessment of Educational Progress by the Educational Testing Service. The commission stated the fundamental principle that "any test of writing should include the act of writing."

The commission expressed concern about the quality of computer software used in the teaching of writing. They noted also a trend towards commercial programs that exclude the instructor from the teaching process, and they endorsed the development of guidelines for evaluating software.

Media

The Commission on Media (David A. England, Director) reported a modest renaissance of interest in media study and use in English--although the interest is mainly among theorists, researchers, and a handful of practitioners. According to one member, "New research in areas like semiotics, structuralism, cognitive psychology, and visual thinking have suggested new directions for the use of media in English education. . . . Some teachers . . . are exploring the perceptual and cognitive structures underlying all media, including writing." Another saw "older" strategies like use of film being redefined, and newer ones like computer-assisted instruction being developed in ways that stress the "fundamental interrelatedness" of media and various subject matter areas.

The commission recognized problems, though. "A classroom teacher noted that "noncontextual use of media" still dominates in many schools. Films are presented purely as entertainment, television programs used to fill a class period, media presentations made "without tie-in with a cohesive curriculum." Another member saw a trend towards "ignoring media-related competencies and objectives in teacher certification programs, partly because control of teacher preparation is moving from schools of education to state departments of education." Additionally a trend toward competency testing for teachers is working against support for media instruction, because media competencies are less testable than traditional academic competencies.

Commission members raised numerous issues related to computers and English. One worried about computers in the curriculum in light of the "sad track record" of radio, film, and TV. The predictable pattern of new media in the curriculum is one

of overstated initial predictions; varied applications with few verifiable results; equipment anxiety among teachers; and ultimately, limited use of new equipment and techniques in specific sites. To avoid this, educators must clarify objectives with relation to the computer and keep them clearly in mind.

Another commission member noted overemphasis on the computer as a "deliverer of instruction" and called for greater use of the computer as a tool; that is, students need to know how to access data bases, define search terms, evaluate information, estimate costs for data searches, and the like. He also warned that teachers in other disciplines are defining what "computer literacy" is--and "too often, that turns out to mean programming for everyone."

Two members commented on the effects of new technologies on thinking skills. One suggested that word-based adventure games on computers might encourage the forming of mental images; that the sequential logic of computer programming might help develop linear thinking; and that both of these effects differ from those of television. Another hypothesized two different--and contrary--effects of TV on children's mental visualization. TV might be weakening image-forming powers by providing images, or it might be habituating children to visual thinking, thereby encouraging it.

Questions of "telecommunication ethics" were raised by a member concerned about providing students with awareness of the effects of new technologies on our behavior. Another held that attitude-shaping by commercial television remains an important educational problem, stating that "we must go beyond teaching students good taste and intelligent viewing habits." Students must learn "to cope with television's hidden message, to recognize. . . destructive values."